WATER TO WINE
John 2:1-12
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The purpose of this enterprise is nothing less than the redemption of the whole creation. The Bible is not at all modest in the way it describes it: the reconciliation of the world, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth; to heal the whole universe, to save the human race. We need an occasional reminder that the goal of this project is cosmic in dimension, and that, from the beginning, the strategy has been to do it by seeing to the conversion of individual people, singly, laboriously, one at a time.

The assumption, from the beginning, has been that individuals, in order to participate in the reconciliation and redemption of the whole creation, need to change. The assumption throughout the Bible and throughout the whole fascinating panorama of this enterprise has been consistently that God's Kingdom is peopled by folk who have changed, repented, stopped doing old things, begun to do new things; in short, people who have been converted.

We need a blunt reminder on occasion because there is within those assertions, when they become organized and institutionalized, an almost irresistable propensity in the direction of dulling the cutting edge, sanding off all the abrasive surfaces, and forgetting the original purpose of the enterprise.

We need the reminder because when religion gets itself institutionalized, it seems to be concerned most strenuously with the survival of its own institutions. In fact, if you ever wish to document the need for people to be converted, and the irrelevance of a lot of organized religion to that need, all you need to do is list the instances when the church of Jesus Christ took positions, served its own purposes, but which would have appalled Jesus Christ - such as refusing to admit Black people, or to ordain women, or baptizing with respectable piety political systems which are cruel, inhuman and oppressive.

It is not possible to read very far in the New Testament without encountering a reminder of this purpose and these assumptions. The lesson, this morning, for instance: the introductory story about the ministry of Jesus as it is presented in the Fourth Gospel.

Why in the world did Jesus show up at that wedding in Cana? What does it mean that he changed water into wine at that wedding? It would have been a seven-day festival. It began with a gala processional in which friends of the groom escorted the bride to his house for a wedding supper, followed by a seven-day period of uninterrupted celebrating. There is an ancient tradition that Mary, mother of Jesus, was the aunt of the groom and that he was none other than John the son of Zebedee who appears elsewhere in the Gospel narrative. There is no documentation of those traditions, but it is certain that Mary and Jesus, if not related, were close friends of the groom and his family.

When they arrived in Cana: Jesus, his mother, and friends, the supply of wine for the festivities suddenly and unexpectedly ran out. Scholars who comb through the details of these matters suggest that Jesus and company either came late in the week, or were unexpected guests, or - because of their poverty - neglected to follow the near Eastern custom which was, and in some Arabic cultures still is, bringing one's own wine to add to the common supply for the party.

Whatever the reason, the wine was gone, and we may deduce that the groom was furious, his mother frantic, his father humiliated, his bride in tears. Mary apparently knew them well enough to feel part of that pain herself, as only good friends can.

She called the distressing situation to Jesus' attention and he made a strange request. Near the entrance to the house stood six large stone jars. They were part of the foyer furniture of all houses. Their function was to hold the water for the various rites of purification practiced in a Jewish household. Several times a day, including meal time, the Orthodox washed their hands. When guests arrived, they used a bit of the water in the jars to wash. The jars, by the way, each held twenty-to thirty gallons.

Jesus told them to fill these jars with water which the servants did, though one can't help but imagine that they were less than enthusiastic about their curious assignment. The professional host, or steward was summoned. When he tasted the contents of the jars he discovered very good wine; so good, in fact, that he chided his employer for not serving the good wine first. The obvious inference is that after several days of party no one notices the difference if the quality of wine suddenly changes. And so the party continues now with Jesus and friends in attendance, and with at least 120 gallons of good wine to keep it going.

What does it mean? It helps, first, to note that the author calls what happened a sign. The fact that changing water into wine is improbable, unlikely, impossible in fact on the basis of anyone's understanding of chemistry, seems not to concern him at all. "The author", Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown, points out, "mentions the miracle almost as an aside." The physical makeup of the contents of the jar is not the astounding thing here, therefore: the power and grace of Jesus is.

Signs, of course, point elsewhere. It is the essence of a sign not to call attention to itself but to direct it elsewhere. There is a sense in which a sign which receives too much attention actually begins to violate its own purpose, as anyone has discovered, for instance, who is so busy collating, comparing, and computing the information that comes at one on the signs ~~at the confluence of Routes 315, 670, and 33~~ that one ends up at Ohio stadium rather than Broad Street Church.

We would like to know how it is that H_2O becomes Chablis, and that Western, scientific curiosity serves us extremely well except here, because the author apparently neither knows nor much cares. The text will not yield an answer and one of the reasons is that it doesn't ask the question. The sign points not to better life through funny chemistry but to this extraordinary person. It is a sign pointing to Jesus.

It points, I believe, to the fact that things get changed in contact with Jesus. I began by suggesting that Christian people - need the reminder that this is so. It is part of our humanity, I would submit, not to want to change, to assume, rather, that though others may need to expand their horizons, grow, change, repent, the status quo in our lives is actually quite good the way it is. Liberal Protestantism, someone noted, has left the whole idea of conversion to the fundamentalists. We find the soul-shattering, emotional upheaval commonly

identified with conversion so distasteful that we keep the idea at arm's length. But in that process we miss the essence and much of the power of our faith we espouse. There are legitimate reasons for not agreeing with the guilt inducing, hellfire and brimstone tirades of the fundamentalist evangelist. But predictably, our reaction has been to the opposite extreme. If making people feel bad is wrong, American Protestantism spends a lot of energy making them feel good. A book crossed my desk recently under the curious title "Self Esteem - The New Reformation": it is not a bad book actually, but the title must have the Reformers, who thought too much self was near the heart of the human problem, sighing in disbelief. William Willmon, writing recently in the Christian Century, said, "Unfortunately, we have psychologized the gospel, turned it into a feeling, transformed the kingdom of God into a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking that the Messiah we await is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear." (Christian Century, 12/8/82, page 1247)

Part of both the joy and the task of being a Christian is change: personal change. The power has always been in the way discipleship to Jesus gently leads us to change the way we treat others, the way we spend money, the way we establish personal priorities, the way we cast our ballots. The power of our religion is best seen in the changes it has already affected: it was Christianity that brought orphanages to Rome and the end of gladiatorial murder as public entertainment. Hospitals were a Christian invention. The early educational institutions in the New World were begun, without exception, either by clergy, or to train clergy, or both. We have changed human history, and the same dynamic which is evident on a grand scale operates personally. The analogy is a poor one, but the most important people in life, are the ones who have forced us to change: the ones who saw more in us than we ever recognized: the teacher, coach, friend, parent who caused us to grow. That is near the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is the first reality to which the sign of Cana points.

The second is that Jesus, and therefore Christian faith, is comfortable with the world as home. Madeleine L'Engle, in a wonderful essay on love and marriage, To a Long Loved Love, writes, "Too many people would like to forget that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine at a marriage feast, in a glorious affirmation of human love, human joy, human pain."

John the Baptist, to whom some of Jesus' disciples were attracted, would not have been caught dead at that wedding celebration. Nor would many of the more vocal Christians I know today. One hundred and twenty gallons of wine would have them heading for the exits. At the outset of the Fourth Gospel, however, the author wants his readers to understand that you don't have to be other-worldly, long-faced, and grimly pious to follow Jesus.

It is a word the church in every age has desparately needed to hear. We have flirted constantly with that old Greek dualistic philosophy which regards the created order, the flesh, the world of senses, feelings, appetites, sounds, colors as evil and the world of the spirit, ideas, soul, clearly the more appropriate and holy. The Christian church has never been sure that God knew what he was doing when he created human beings with bodies instead of allowing them to exist as inanimate spirits. From its celibate clergy, to its contemporary aversion to honest sex education, much Christianity seems to have concluded that human sexuality is a big cosmic mistake.

Soren Kierkegaard remarked somewhere that while Jesus turned water into wine, his church seems determined to turn the wine back into water.

The second reality to which the sign of Cana points, I believe, is the consistent goodness of the creation and the consistency of the Gospel with the good gifts of life in all its dimensions.

The third reality to which Cana points is, quite simply, Jesus himself. As the scholar Raymond Brown taught us earlier, "The purpose of the sign...is revelation about the person of Jesus...What shines through is his glory, and the only reaction that is emphasized is the belief of the disciples." (Anchor Bible, p. 103)

The sign of Cana is Jesus himself, getting involved in a mundane human situation, helping along a wedding celebration about to end prematurely for lack of refreshments. Compared to that - compared to the assertion that Almighty God gets himself involved in that sort of thing, the mere changing of water to wine, pales in drama. The Incarnation is and always has been the real miracle. The person of Jesus - the Christ - is the staggering assertion here. The Holy God come among us in the flesh in the life of one who cares about things like a wedding celebration, and the birth of a child, and the graduation of a son, and the death of grandparents; the God who cares so deeply about the day to day living of the people he has created that he gets into life with them. Incarnation. Jesus the Christ. The Miracle.

The conversion: the change at the heart of Christianity is not simply moral improvement, although that is the result. It is not the change to be more liberal politically, or more conservative: it is not to change life styles, although that will surely happen. The conversion is to Jesus Christ. The invitation is to accept his Lordship: to live in relation to him, in obedience to his will.

I need the weekly reminder in worship, near the beginning, when we are told: "In Christ we become new people altogether." The Good News is that in Christ we are accepted and forgiven by God, the past is finished and gone. But, for my money, the best news of all comes next: "In Christ, everything has become fresh and glorious new."

And so, may we sing it once more:

"Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns!
Let men and women their songs employ.
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy." AMEN.